

Date: May, 4, 1983

Place of interview: Foster Community Center.

Interview with: Mrs. Geraldine Cooper, Beulah Avery & Ruby Alexander

Interview by: David Otuusu-Ansah

Comments: a) This was a round table discussion, the only personal collections were of the ladies background: eg. date of birth, place of birth and places lived besides Evanston.

b) The ladies were very relaxed and friendly and freely commented on the general questions I asked them.

c) Shortly before the interview, a grade school class arrived at the Center (as part of the Center's activities) the pupil sang songs to entertain the elderly; after which we all joined in the coffee and cake refreshments.

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Q. In what year were you born; If you where not born in Evanston when did you come to the city and why did you come to Evanston?

A. (Geraldine Cooper) I was born in Evanston in 1918.

(Beulah Avery) I was born in Colorado in 1916 and in 1939 after 2½ years of college, I met a man from Evanston (Mr Cooper), we got married and I moved with him to Evanston.

(Ruby Alexander) I was born in South Carolina in 1916, I was about four year old in 1921 when my parents moved to Evanston.

Q. What work did your parents hold?

A. (Mrs. Cooper) My mother was a housewife but my father worked for a steel industry, I suppose as a junitor.

(Ruby Alexander) My parents were farmers in S. Carolina.

Q. What did they grow Mrs. Alexander?

A. What do people grow in the south? Cotton, Corn? everything... (laughter).

(Avery) My mother did not work, but my father worked for a gas company, I guess as a junitor.

Q. What jobs have you taken over these years?

A. It is difficult to remember all the jobs one held over the years (a general statement from all the ladies); but Mrs. Cooper Ruby Alexander said that she worked at St. Francis hospital in Evanston for 29 years as a nursing aid till she retired. Mrs. Cooper worked in the YMCA clothing store and later for an interior design firm as a stock girl; after which she became a secretary. Mrs. Beulah Avery had once worked for the Fair departmental store; also as a secretary for the girls scotts as a secretary. She later volunteered her services in a jubior high school. From this position she was appointed a secretary ~~in the~~ in the office of the superintendent of education.

Q. What memories do you have of your school days in Evanston?

A. The schools were generally segregated.

(Mrs Cooper)- I went to school which was on Noyes street, now the Noyes Art Center, but the blacks in the class were to sit in the back roll of the classroom. You see, the black neighbourhoods in Evanston has not changed much, it has rather expanded and at Noyes, there were one or two Jewish neighbours. These Jewish were not rich/important as they are today. Mr Krost, for example, ran a junk yard. And like the schools, the theathers in Evanston were segregated in the scense that the blacks were to sit in the balcony. In the school system, the blacks could not join such sporting groups as the swimming clubs because the swimming pools





were for whites only. In fact, the swimming pool was at the YMCA which blacks were not allowed to use. The only sporting club blacks could join was the football teams.

Q. What other areas did you see segregation?

A. Well, the jobs in the departmental stores were for whites; and to our memory, only Chandlers had an elevator for black people. While the white worked as sales persons, a black with equal education could hope to be an elevator operator. Generally, the blacks worked on janitorial duties and as maids.

Q. I read from the Evanston Review that in the early 1920s, white ladies of the Churches were interested to provide education to black maids and baby sitter. Do you know the content of this education?

A. We remember that this education took place on Thursdays like many meetings in Evanston but since none of us were maids we cannot comment on it. Mrs. Ruby Alexander thought the education might have been about how the white mothers wanted their children to be cared for by the black maids.

Q. What was the role of the Church in the Evanston black community?

A. Well the church was every thing, it was a social place where blacks met; it served both material and spiritual needs of the community. We can remember that there were South Carolina and Kentucky clubs in the church--clubs basically of the blacks who came to Evanston from these states, thus facilitating relations among blacks who migrated from the areas in question. Mrs. Ruby Alexander also mentioned the occasional visitation of the youth from other black churches--a kind of exchange program which was aimed at acquainting the members of the church with other blacks in sister church groups.

Q. What other black organizations do you remember?

A. There was the "Iroquois"--a center or a house for new blacks coming to Evanston. This was at the corner of Ridge and Garnett.

Q. What was the quality of life in the 1930s?

A. That was during the depression, many blacks lost their houses, unemployment was high but some blacks worked in the WPA. (The ladies reminded me that there was unemployment also in the white neighbourhoods).

Q. What do you remember of the medical services in Evanston?

A. During the early years, many blacks had home birth. And even though blacks could go to the hospitals for pre-natal care they were not allowed to deliver in a place like the Evanston hospital. There were no blacks admitted to the Evanston hospital. However, they could deliver at the Community hospital where they had black doctors. There was also Mr. Butler and his wife (two black doctors) who ran a hospital at the corner of Asbury. They had a private hospital.

Q. Do you want to comment on race relations in Evanston in general during this period we have talked about?

A. There were not many Jews in Evanston; The relationship between black and whites was one of contract--thus blacks worked for whites but it was not one of master-slave relations. They just worked for the whites. There were no signs such as, "whites only", but every body knew where they were allowed and not allowed to be. Black teachers in the school system were small, and most black substitute teacher were looked upon by the white pupils as





maids because that was the only jobs the children have seen the blacks do. In many schools, the principals have indicated that they would not accept black substitute teachers.

Comment:

At this time the meeting was breaking up and many of the elderly were leaving the center. Mrs Cooper's husband was introduced to me. Mr Cooper, who had served in Evanston as a police officer is at the time of my interview recovering from a stroke and could not talk. I was not able to interview him. The ladies added before the end of the interview that they dont hate white people. What they have told me was in fact the situation as it was. I thanked them for their time and added that I have enjoyed talking with them.



